This Sacred Dust

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This Sacred Dust

Abstract
He was watching his sister coming up the hill to the house. Tall for her eighteen years and still unformed, she was wearing a lime green dress that didn't quite suit her. Her skin honey coloured, faintly freckled; her hair touched with red. One day, with time, the right clothes, she could be beautiful. She had blue eyes. Only the slight curve of the eyebrow, the cast of the wrbt revealed her father's heritage. She had yet to learn to walk as a woman; at present hers was the long legged ambling of the school girl. It was all familiar to him: the view across the vegetable garden; the red dirt road that curved on up the hill, dusty in the heat, viscous mud after rain. The hills in the distance didn't change. Those clouds had been there all his life. His father had built this house: square cement blocks, pink washed, dark brown doors and louvres framed by hibiscus, red and beige floor tiles; and after thirty years his mother had still complained about the red dirt that splattered the walls, that washed down from the road, down the garden, red dirt that seemed to ooze through the very walls of the house, coating everything with rust.
He was watching his sister coming up the hill to the house. Tall for her eighteen years and still unformed, she was wearing a lime green dress that didn’t quite suit her. Her skin honey coloured, faintly freckled; her hair touched with red. One day, with time, the right clothes, she could be beautiful. She had blue eyes. Only the slight curve of the eyebrow, the cast of the wrist revealed her father’s heritage. She had yet to learn to walk as a woman; at present hers was the long legged ambling of the school girl.

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The garden itself had always been full in season of pumpkin, beans, peas, yams, cocos, sweet and Irish potatoes. His mother had struggled to grow lettuce, but it shrivelled in the heat, or was eaten by grubs and insects. She had tomato plants near the porch, and a papaya. Each year they managed some bananas. It was hot this August afternoon, so hot that even the insects seemed too enervated to conduct their usual afternoon dance. From the hen house came an occasional tired cluck in answer to the lazy ring of a goat bell somewhere further down the hill. He was leaning against the great flame of the forest tree that marked the edge of their property, watching his sister come up the hill. The tree’s great pods hung down from its branches, black and menacing, so many swords of Damocles, so many unknowns.

Donovan Brown did not like the unknown. At age twenty-four he was inexperienced, shy, uncommitted. Despite nine years from twelve to twenty-one spent studying first at Campion and then at UWI, he had accumulated no experience. There were possible explanations: his rural upbringing for one, his catholicism for another, but other boys manage to develop some opinions despite a quiet home life and a catholic education. To his mother, his passivity was a source of quiet irritation. Had she had more time for him, she might have seen that much of the root of his
problem could be traced to her. That is not to say that she had been a
negligent, uncaring mother; neither by any means was she demanding or
domineering. Far from it. In many ways, though, she had been an absence
in Donovan’s life, for his father, a clerk in the Post Office, had suffered
long and horribly from lung cancer, and much of Eileen Brown’s married
life had been taken up with caring for her ailing husband until he merci-
fully released her by dying when Donovan was thirteen.

A clerk in the Jamaican Post Office does not make a large income, and
pensions are not always sufficient to keep a widow and two children. The
deceased Mr. Brown had left his wife the house, which he had built on
land inherited from his mother, and her two children. Fortunately, when
Mrs Brown had been Eileen Malloy of County Cork, she had ‘gone to the
nursing’ in Liverpool and there she had somehow managed to earn an
S.R.N. as well as meet Mr Brown: much to the shock of her parents and
her seven brothers and sisters, she had married him. There were pictures
at home of her and his father on their wedding day. Liverpool 1945. He
was still in his soldier’s uniform, smart, the Jamaica tabs clear on his
shoulders. She was in a tweed suit: a jolly, bouncing girl with bright eyes;
her hair thick and dark under the veiled hat she wore. But Donovan could
not remember her this way. Life had made her tired since her wedding
day.

She had nursed a dying husband and had nursed in the private hospital
in the town; it paid better than the government hospital. She had also had
to make severe adjustments to her life in her new country. The heat in
particular she had found even after thirty years to be oppressing. The red
dirt was her personal curse. She had raised her two children – she
thanked heaven it was only two she had, even though as she had assured
the old priest when he asked her, she had done nothing to prevent more
– with only Iris the slightly retarded daughter of the local dressmaker to
help her. Iris washed, cleaned, scrubbed, and minded children with a
bovine intensity. She was with them still, nearly forty, her mouth still
slightly ajar, but totally dependable.

None of his mother’s life had any affect upon Donovan. With the intro-
version of the young, he had never considered his mother apart from her
relationship to himself. Once when he was eight years old one of his class-
mates had called his mother a ‘porky bitch’. Fired by a rage that he didn’t
understand then, and had never really understood, Donovan had hit the
other boy hard, drawing blood. At that time, his mother’s whiteness was
simply another manifestation of his own otherness. He neither rejoiced
nor hated his sense of separation; he held on to it, because it was recog-
nizable, known, and therefore comforting.

At his high school there had been boys whose fathers were labourers
and boys whose fathers were lawyers. He had never considered whether
his family were rich or poor, but he sensed rather than knew that if his
father had been richer, more than a minor official in the post office, then
having a white mother would not have been unusual. If his father had been a successful professional man, a doctor say, then perhaps things would have been different. If they had lived in Saint Andrew or Stony Hill, rather than in the bush. But his father had been a clerk in the post office, and his mother was Irish. And her whiteness, her Irishness, he began to feel, was unusual. She was not like the other white women he had seen. He was embarrassed by her. His mother was fat. Even her feet were fat; her hands were fat. Her wedding ring nestled in the folds of fat in her hand. Except when she wore her nurse’s uniform to work, his mother favoured large, flower printed tops and stretch pants. She thrust tired feet into rubber thongs.

He never considered why she might be suffering, and he never considered her own frustrations. He thought only of himself, so during his years at high school and in university, he held her in the background, something inexplicable, that did not fit a pattern. He carefully nurtured reticence, so that he did not have to explain, describe, account for himself. It was this habit of passive withdrawal that irritated his mother intensely. Though inarticulate, she was not insensitive. Although her life had been hard, she bore no sense of grievance, but she did begin to think that as her son grew to adulthood, she had the right to expect more of him than he gave her. She could find no way of discussing the matter with him, and no way of helping him overcome his sense of difference. So she found herself nagging at him to make something of himself, to do something, be something. Yet she knew that on the surface she had little to complain of; in his daily life Donovan was ordered, reliable, and respectful. Yet she could not touch him. She was afraid there was nothing to touch. She did not know her own son, could find no way to describe or define him, yet she could find no complaint to make against him.

Part of the problem of course was that Donovan was not essentially of an enquiring disposition. From childhood he had accepted what the world had given him; had never questioned the divisions he perceived. There was an inside and an outside to everything, and his place was outside. He had reached this decision before he took his Common Entrance exam and went to Kingston, and he had taken his separation as an article of faith: he believed in it; it consoled him for his sense of difference. It made life easy for him. He did not see it as arrogance. He held back from the opportunity of making friends, unsure of where he belonged, holding on to those things that didn’t change, trying to ignore those that did.

He accepted his degree the way he took everything else. It made little impression upon him. He had drifted into sciences because they appeared to demand nothing but memory from him. He remembered things, but made no commitment to them. He studied his subjects and passed exams. Yet he gained no distinction in his work, for he had no imagination; he could deal with what was already known, but had no desire to go beyond
it, no desire to ask any question. He had acquaintances, but no friends, no enemies. He desired nothing.

At twenty-one he came home to a job in the laboratory of the Agricultural Division of one of the Bauxite companies: a good job paying more than he could have earned in a government lab in Kingston. He bought a car. He lived at home with his mother and his sister. He went to Mass on Sundays.

He had thought when he came back from Kingston that he was returning to a place that he knew, but he was wrong. Oh, the house and garden were the same; the view unchanged. Iris still moved adenoidally through the house, her face blank with benevolence. But his mother and his sister? He found himself living in close quarters with two people who were unfamiliar to him. For most of his life, he had held himself aloof from his mother, and now he cultivated a vague, embarrassed affection for her, but it was tempered with distaste. The lard of her flesh disgusted him. Her unspoken desires and demands irritated and shamed him. Whatever it was his mother wanted from him, he could not give. He did not know his sister, Maura.

She was six years his junior. When he had gone to Kingston she had been but six years old. When he had come home for school vacations, she had been a lanky, pale, female thing with frizzy braids who spent her time first with dolls on the back porch, and then with girl friends from the convent school where she held a scholarship. He did not know how to begin to get to know her, so he did not try. Yet they lived side by side amicably enough.

For the first time in his life, he began to feel dissatisfied with his situation. His carefully tended habit of non-involvement had left him totally without social graces. He was conscious of feeling unspecified longings for something more, yet he had no idea what it might be. He was lonely, yet he did not recognise the feeling as loneliness. He was bored.

At first, he had been content with his job, testing soil samples, working with pesticides and herbicides, writing neat almost pedantic reports. But as he became more experienced, he found it lacking in challenge, repetitive. He worked quite well with his American colleagues – he was the only Jamaican chemist in the lab – but he didn’t really know them. He didn’t question the fact that they earned about a third more than he did for the same job, simply because they were American. As always, he accepted. He was too withdrawn to flirt with typists and lab assistants who worked with them. He found the walk through the outer office to his work station in the lab a daily torture, the girls in their company uniform dresses of sunshine yellow, a minefield of clattering, chattering flowers. Some of them had tried to be friendly to him, but he was unable to respond in kind. He had never taken a girl out, and would have been surprised to know that he had been regarded with many a fond hope by several of the young women who worked with him. After all, he was unmarried, un-
attached, and by local standards well off. If he had known that he had been seen in this light, he would have been horrified. After a while the girls lost interest, for he was always so cold, so withdrawn, not impolite, just a shadow.

Perhaps if he had had some friends locally, but what acquaintances he had made in his childhood were mostly gone. From most of the local boys with whom he had gone to the little government elementary school, he was separated by the gulf of education. Few of them had finished school, and now they worked as labourers in the alumina plants. Of those people whom he had met at school and university, none had chosen to leave Kingston, unless they had gone abroad. The town itself was a town divided into bauxite workers and others, a town divided into locals and ex-patriots, a town divided into the exploiters and the exploited, and of the last two, no-one really knew which was which.

It had changed since the days when his father had been an official in the old post office. The town centre was still there: the old Anglican church, the Court House, and the new market still clustered round the green; the country buses still rumbled in to the centre of the town, but the life of the town had moved away, to the edges where new plazas had been built with American style shops. The Delgados had sold their old dry goods store on Nelson Street and built a modern supermarket in the new Shoppers' Plaza. Businesses that didn't modernize and put in glass and air conditioning found that their clientele did not include the Americans and Canadians, but that didn't really matter, for everyone connected with the mines had money. The Nessims increased their inventory of refrigerators and freezers; hourly workers from the plant mortgaged their earnings for the next two years to buy electric stoves. Everyone had a car.

Donovan had money, but he found little to interest him in parting with it. There was little for a quiet, single man to do. Occasionally he went to the cinema, sitting upstairs. There were of course the bars, both in the town and the little one room shacks lit by gas lamps out along the roads outside the town. But he did not patronise them. Their dark secretiveness appalled him. The tall, young, black women with their large white teeth, heavy breasts and languid availability repelled him.

His life developed a rhythm of work and home. He appeared a model son, driving his mother to shop in the supermarket, driving her to work if their schedules matched. He sat at home in the evenings watching the television or listening to his new stereo. He bought them a freezer. He helped in the garden. Sometimes in the evenings he would sit out on the back porch and look out across the garden across the hill. The hill looked more alive at night than in the day time. He could see the lights of all the little houses. He could see the lights of the cars as they drove to and from the town, hear the distant laughter of people returning from work, hear the incessant beat of the reggae on the portable radios they carried.
It was on these evenings that his mother would endeavour, as best she could, to try to reach him. It seemed to her a long time since she had been the laughing girl in her wedding photograph, but she remembered something of the excitement of youth, of its idealism. She looked at her son, slumped in an old rocking chair, gazing out across the darkened hills, and was irritated and anxious. With the best of intentions, she upbraided him for having no friends, for not going out, for not bringing young people to the house as his sister did. She could not understand that he had no friends, and that if he did, he would never bring them here. He looked at his mother and saw her tired and fat in the other chair. Her blue eyes were losing their sparkle. He felt a hint of her anxiety, sensed something of her own loneliness, but he could do nothing. She was a burden to him still, something that would have to be explained, but he had no-one who needed the explanation. And she would purse her lips and sigh, ease her bulk into a more comfortable position.

Even breathing demanded energy these days. She would turn her tired eyes back to the television; her mind back somewhere in the Ireland of her youth, back in the shell-shocked streets of wartime Liverpool. This silence in her son, she could not explain it, had not wanted it, but could not fill it; whatever had been the time to know each other had passed. So she worried, and watched, and said nothing, and turned in towards herself again while her eyes watched the flickering black and grey shadows on the television.

Donovan took to going for long evening drives, out into the country, up the unpaved, winding rural roads, where he could catch glimpses of the country people, people who lived where the power company had not yet strung a power line, people who took their water from a community stand pipe, people who still spent their lives barefoot. He passed the stalls selling roast corn; he avoided running over scrawny chickens that wandered freely in between the houses that were little more than shacks. He looked out at the dark faces of the people, purple shadows in the oil lit dark of the villages, but he never stopped. He could see them dancing quite spontaneously, women displaying thick hairy armpits in torn cotton dresses, their wide feet stained red by the dirt, their hair in curlers. Some held babies to their breasts. The men were barefoot also, brawny, often missing teeth. They danced alone and with the women. He saw them all as creatures of the earth, unrelated to him, exotic moving pieces in the dark kaleidoscope of the evening. He saw the surprise in their great round eyes as they saw the unknown car; saw their dark mouths open in question. Then he was gone, and they forgot him, laughingly turning back to their own danse macabre. They were nothing to him. And the next morning he would go back into work and test soil for ph levels.

And what of Maura at this time? Maura worked and worked. Her effort resulted in eight O levels, and three A levels: all with distinction. And now he was watching her walk up the hill; tomorrow she left for Boston,
left for a Catholic Ladies’ College, left for a scholarship won through her own work, obtained through the intervention of the nuns at her school. Tomorrow she escaped, escaped to a world Donovan suspected he could never know. She had been to Eileen’s new grave, only a month old.

He leant against the flaming tree and surveyed Eileen’s legacy to him. This house, this garden, were now his, and Maura’s. But would she want it in Boston? And yet it was more than the house and the land that Eileen had left him. Now he was free of her, free of her weight around him and upon him, free of her sad blue eyes, reproachful but silent, free of all the things that she had never said to him and of the questions he had never asked her. Now he was free of her, he needed her.

Her death had been unexpected, or so he had thought, but then he had not really looked at his mother in years. Maura had seen the failing health, heard the failing breath, watched the dimming eyes, but she had said nothing to her brother. Maura in her silent determination to pass exams had seen her brother’s absence and had felt unable to penetrate it. Maura had asked herself angrily for many years about the absence of her mother’s family, why did they never write, never visit? Why had Eileen never gone back to Ireland to see them? Maura had looked at the picture of her father and had known the answer. And as Donovan had ignored his mother, finding her inexplicable, an embarrassment, Maura had pitted her isolation, but in her youth she had been unable to change anything. Unlike her brother, she had not seen Eileen’s whiteness as foreign. Maura had accepted her own fairness with no surprise, no shame, no pride. She accepted it, but did not see it as making her other than those around her. She engaged with the world. She felt herself Jamaican, but more than that, she felt herself Maura. She had determined to succeed; she had thought somehow through her own successes to bring her mother back to light. She had hoped to compensate for her brother’s absence, his lack of engagement. Now it was too late, and she accepted that too. She understood her powers, what she could and could not do. She was not one to waste energy in nostalgia.

In the last few weeks that their mother had lain in the hospital where once she had worked, brother and sister had sat together by her bedside for long hours. Their mother seemed gone already; this pale effusion of flesh and tubing bore no relationship to them. Donovan had been surprised at the number of people who had enquired for Eileen, who had sent gifts. He had been surprised that she had been remembered in the prayers at church. Maura had not been surprised. She had taken it for granted. Disengaged himself, Donovan had believed his mother placeless, part of that other to which he perceived himself belonging. He had been shown a mother who had had a place. She had been a member of the church, a known colleague at the hospital, a neighbour. People had cared about her.
As each day Eileen slipped further away towards whatever she believed in, Donovan grew daily more desperate to hold on to her, to attempt some explanation of himself, to ask for some guidance from her, but it was too late. Eileen had always been a creature of feelings not words. Her life had tired her, and now she felt for rest. At home in the evening, he would scan his own face in the mirror for her likeness. That which he had once resented became something to be proud of, to be held on to. Now it was his darkness that was a curse, a shadow that denied him opportunity, that had kept him from his mother. Eileen died of heart problems, diabetes, general ill health. She was not an old woman. Free of her presence, Donovan convinced himself he had broken her spirit. For the first time in his life he involved himself. He gave himself up to a wonderful self abasement in guilt. Attending Mass three times a week, he gloried in his own confessions. Father Simon, a bluff ex-marine who had come to the ministry in his late forties, told him to pull himself together, gave him a penance for the sin of pride, and told him to go out and enjoy life.

Maura treated him with a kind of maternal pity. She had grieved for the frustrations of her mother’s life, but she could not grieve for her mother, dead. She accepted the challenge of her own future. Free of her perceived responsibility to Eileen, she looked forward to changes, to getting away. She packed her suitcases, made the last visits to friends. She was leaving.

Donovan, who had spent so much of his life cultivating solitude, viewed the future with an emotion very close to terror. He looked out at the landscape he had known since childhood. In the heat of the afternoon the hills were shadows of menace; the trailing plants were unfamiliar, strange tangled vines to trap him. There was no median between the light and the shade. The sun, bright, harsh bleached colour from everything it touched. The plants, the walls gleamed white hot. The shade was purple dark, hiding everything but the sound of weary insects. Maura passed into the house and he followed her. He recognised nothing but the picture of the Sacred Heart above his mother’s empty bed and the red dirt upon the floor still resisting all attempts to wash it away.